

Every culture has its important annual events. Of the numerous festivals and ceremonial events that punctuate Japan's calendar, perhaps the one to which people are most deeply attached is *Shōgatsu*, celebrating the beginning of the New Year. School and most workplaces have a holiday that lasts for as much as a week between year-end and the first few days of the New Year, and people spend these days each in their own preferred and accustomed way. Each part of the country has local traditions and customs for celebrating *Shōgatsu*, but the one custom that people, young and old, man or woman, in every part of the country feel is indispensable is the sending of New Year's cards called *nengajō*. In this issue we introduce this greeting-card custom that is so widely and deeply established as part of Japanese life. Unlike greeting cards sent in Western countries, these cards are customarily delivered on the morning of January 1, and the post office mobilizes thousands of extra personnel to accomplish this task.

### Greeting Card Messages

As the year-end approaches, everyone from primary school children to their grandparents busy themselves with the task of writing their *nengajō* early enough to make sure they will be posted on time. And they look forward to seeing the cards that arrive from friends and relatives. *Nengajō* are also exchanged among business associates. *Nengajō* bring formal greetings for New Year's and messages wishing the receiver happiness and health. They are intended to express a sense of sharing in bringing in the new year and of hope

and celebration, turning over a new leaf as they look forward to the months ahead. In addition, they carry expressions of gratitude for favors received in the preceding year and of hopes for continued close relations in the year ahead.

Exchange of *nengajō* is both a way of keeping up with acquaintances one is normally out of touch with and of cementing ties with friends, colleagues, and others who have helped one another in various ways. Thus, even the modest postcard plays a big role in lubricating human relations in Japanese society. While most *nengajō* today are either printed or produced on word processors, if they include messages written by hand with pen or brush, they can more effectively communicate genuine feeling and warmth.

### How *Nengajō* Began

The custom of writing *nengajō* goes back to the Heian period (794-1185), and when the modern postal service set up by the Meiji government began to print postcards in 1873 (Meiji 6), postcards began to be sent as New Year's greetings. Sending *nengajō* became even more widespread in 1906 (Meiji 39) when the post office started to print specially designated *nengajō*. In 1949 (Shōwa 24) the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications started its *o-toshidama-tsuki nenga hagaki*, a *nengajō* postcard imprinted with numbers in a national lottery, the stakes named after the gifts of money often given to children at New Year's (see *The Japan Forum Newsletter* 10, p. 11), and the sending of *nengajō* became a nationwide practice. Today, national-lottery numbered postcards including a 3-yen donation to various public benefits have been added, and 4.325 billion *o-toshidama-tsuki nenga* postcards were printed in 1998 for delivery at New Year's 1999. Statistics show that each household sends an average of 100 *nengajō* to relatives and friends. People also send *nengajō* at their workplaces as greetings to clients, regular customers, and business associates.

It was once the custom for people to pay formal visits directly at the homes of relatives, friends, and neighbors to present their greetings and wishes for the New Year. From the end of World War II, however, this practice rapidly went out of fashion, and the sending of *nengajō* came along as a widely favored substitute. People still make a point of visiting their parents and grandparents. Sometimes company employees go to the homes of their superiors and students present themselves at their professor's homes even today.

#### Japanese expressions often used in *nengajō*

##### Set New Year's greetings

あけましておめでとうございます (*Akemashite omedetō gozaimasu.*)

\*あけまして (*Akemashite*) derives from 明ける (*akeru*); to dawn, open, begin, as in "one year ends and the new year begins"

\*おめでとう (*omedetō*); expresses congratulations, used when people celebrate something

\*ございます Adding *gozaimasu* makes the expression of congratulations more polite.

謹賀新年 (*Kinga shinnen*)

\*謹 meaning reverence, respectfulness

\*賀 meaning celebration, joy

\*新年 New Year

迎春 (*Geishun*)

\*迎 for greeting or welcoming

\*春 for spring

The New Year comes in winter, but in the ancient calendar, it was considered "spring."

##### Additional messages

**Thank you for your kindness and help during the past year**

\*旧年中は 大変お世話になり ありがとうございます  
*Kyūnenchū wa taihen o-sewa ni nari, arigatō gozaimashita.*

\*昨年はいいろいろお世話になりました

*Sakunen wa iroiro o-sewa ni narimashita*

**I look forward to your continued good will in the coming year**

\*本年も どうぞ よろしく お願い申し上げます

*Honnen mo dōzo yoroshiku onegai mōshiagemasu.*

\*今年もよろしく!

*Kotoshi mo yoroshiku!*

\*今年もなかよくしてね / なかよくしような /

いっしょにあそぼうね! (often used by children)

*Kotoshi mo nakayoku shite ne./nakayoku shiyō na./ isshoni asobō ne.*

**Wishing you good health/happiness, etc.**

\*みなさまの ご健康を お祈り申し上げます。

*Minasama no go-kenkō o o-inori mōshiagemasu.*

\*今年もよい年になりますように!

*Kotoshi mo yoi toshi ni narimasu yō ni.*

# Nengajō Miscellany

Address: prefecture, county/  
city/ward, township/town/  
district/village name,  
house number (in this order)

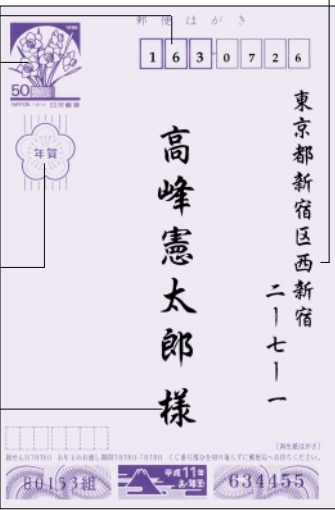
Postal code

Prepaid postcards are  
ordinarily ¥50. Prepaid lottery  
postcards with a printed  
picture are 5 yen extra,  
2 yen to cover design  
and production costs  
and 3 yen as a donation to  
various public benefits.

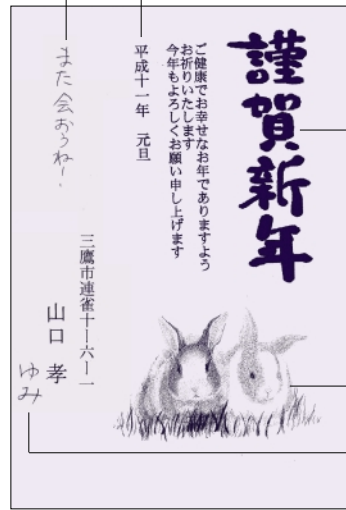
年賀 (*nenga*) mark  
Postcards with this  
mark are delivered on  
or after January 1.

様 (*sama*) is added to names  
(title corresponding to Mr.,  
Mrs., Miss, or Ms.).  
This 様 must be added to the  
name of the addressee  
of any postal item.  
Address and name of sender  
should be written in smaller  
letters than that of addressee.  
If the address and name of  
sender appear on the other  
side of the card, it may be  
omitted from the front.

New Year's gift lottery number



**A** Address side



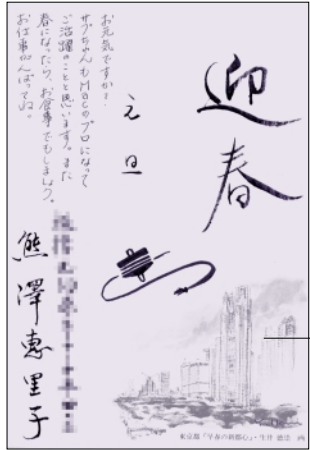
**B** Message side Commonly used style

Handwritten  
平成十一年(Heisei 11): In addition to the Gregorian calendar, Japanese people use the *gengō* system of dates, numbering the years from the beginning of the reign of the current emperor. The present emperor came to the throne in 1989 and the reign name is Heisei, so year 1999 is the 11th year of Heisei.

元旦 (*gantān*) means the morning of January 1. 旦. This kanji, written with the character for "sun" above a straight line, expresses the image of the sun rising over the horizon. Instead of using the date the card is written, the cards are dated Heisei 11, *gantān* (January 1, 1999.)

謹賀新年 *Kinga shinnen* (Happy New Year) See *nengajō* expressions

When children use their parent's *nengajō*, as in this example, they write their name next to their parent's name.



**C** Card with calligraphy

This is an old-style greeting, written with a brush in *sumi* ink.

The *nengajō* with public-benefits contribution have pictures or drawings printed on them. This one shows the skyline of Tokyo's Shinjuku area where TJF is located.



**D** Card with photos

Many families send New Year's cards printed with a family picture, as in this example. Local photography shops make these cards to order. Here the names of all the family members printed below.



**E** Original-design *nengajō*

Many people enjoy designing their own *nengajō* with original drawings, stamps, or block-printed decorations. Recently more people are printing their own *nengajō* using computers or word processors. Happy New Year: Greetings in English are used quite commonly.

- Eto (*jikkan jūnishi*):** 1999 is the Year of the Rabbit. The ancient Chinese system of the calendar, based on cycles of sixty years, was introduced to Japan in the sixth century. The calendar was created by combining ordered sets of symbols called *jikkan* ("10 stems") and *jūnishi* ("12 branches") The *jūnishi* set consists of animals (Rat, Ox, Tiger, Rabbit, Dragon, Snake, Horse, Sheep, Monkey, Rooster, Dog, Boar, in that order). This system continues to be used in Japan today to express the year.  
Daily conversation often includes comments about the animal of the year in which one was born.
- Kagamimochi**  
Prosperous-looking large rice cakes (as big as a *kagami* or circular mirror of the ancient type) are stacked as an offering to the gods at New Year's.
- Kadomatsu**  
Pine is the symbol of longevity and bamboo a symbol of prosperity because pine is evergreen and bamboo grows quickly. Decorations made of pine and bamboo are placed inside and outside houses and businesses at New Year's.

# A Nengajō Calendar (1998-1999)

Illustration: Asayama Yuki



## 1998 Nov. 2 (Mon.)

Lottery-numbered *nenga* postcards put on sale (3,633,400,000 printed).

## Nov. 13 (Fri.)

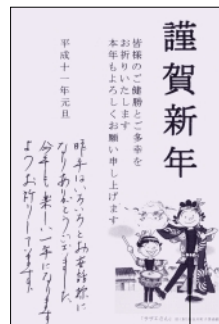
Public-benefit and lottery-numbered *nenga* postcards put on sale (5,816,000,000 printed).

## Nov. 16 (Mon.)

Additional printing of 10 million donation and lottery-numbered *nenga* postcard featuring *Sazae-san*, the cartoon character popular among Japanese of all ages.

## Nov. 27 (Fri.)

Additional printing for the Tokyo area of 1 million more *Sazae-san* postcards, which had proved very popular.



Sazae-san

## Dec. 15 (Mon.)

First day for posting *nengajō*. A ceremony was held of the "first postcard sent" and special *nengajō* receptacles were set up in post offices to facilitate the sorting process. Senders separate their *nengajō* into local city, local prefecture or metropolis, and other prefectures, and bundle them with rubber bands before posting. Handled separately from ordinary mail, *nengajō* are sorted and then kept at the local post office until Jan. 1. The post office encourages every one to post their *nengajō* by December 24 so that they can be delivered on time to any part of the country.

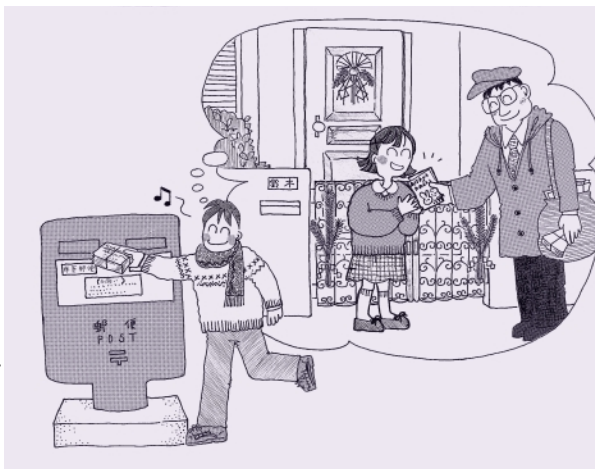


Illustration: Asayama Yuki



Photo: Asahi Shimbun



## 1999 Jan. 1 (Fri.) at 8:00

A ceremony was held at the Shinjuku main post office, in the presence of the Minister of Posts and Telecommunications, launching the delivery of New Year's mail. At a signal, postmen across the country leave their local post offices to begin delivery of *nengajō*. Every year, the post office hires numerous student part-timers to help sort and deliver New Year's mail in the attempt to meet the Jan. 1 morning deadline. (*Nengajō* are delivered as priority mail until Jan. 8.)



Photo: Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications

## Jan. 15 (Fri.)

Announcement of lottery prize-winning numbers

Winners may claim their prizes between January 18 (Mon.) and July 19 (Tues.). Every year, the prize-winning numbers in the national *nengajō* lottery are published in the evening news and announced on television on the evening of January 15th. This year, the top prizes include digital video cameras, televisions, and washing machines; second prizes include health meters and pedometers, six small packets from a choice of one hundred types of local products including apples from Aomori, green tea from Shizuoka, etc., digital cameras, electronic system date books, mini-disc players, sets of *futon*, and other items; third prize includes one small packet from a choice of the local products mentioned above, and fourth prize consists of commemorative postage stamps printed with the *eto* animal of the year.

When you receive a *nengajō* from someone who you did not mail one to, you can send a return *nengajō* until Jan. 7. Postcards sent after that date fall into a different category known as "kanchū mimai," or winter greetings.